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**PLAN FOR
COAL
DISTRIBUTION**



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September, 1956.

PLAN FOR COAL DISTRIBUTION

A FABIAN GROUP

1. INTRODUCTION

BY the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act, 1946, the coal industry, and certain of its ancillaries passed into public ownership. Coal distribution did not; though certain sales depots, formerly belonging to the colliery companies, passed to the National Coal Board as part of its ancillary activities.

One of the duties of the Board, as set out in Section I of the Act is, however,

'making supplies of coal available, of such qualities and sizes and at such prices as may seem to them best calculated to serve the public interest in all respects including the avoidance of any undue or unreasonable preference or advantage.'

This seems to imply some kind of obligation on the Board to influence and guide coal distribution through to the ultimate consumer. But, so far, its efforts in this direction have been limited to extending its direct sales to big consumers, without the intervention of 'factors' (i.e., wholesale distributors who do the paper work and accept certain responsibilities without physically handling the coal); to eliminating restrictive covenants between collieries and distributors; and to maintaining the retail trade of selling depots taken over with the collieries, which bring the Board a profit of about £300,000 a year.

The Board has not, in short, taken as one of its duties the reform of retail coal distribution, considering, no doubt, that for the time being its hands were full enough with the reform of the industry itself. Nevertheless, the Nationalisation Act does suggest, by the passage quoted above, that the Board has a certain obligation to interest itself in what becomes of its coal, and in whether the quantities and qualities supplied are being used to serve the public interest in all respects. It has, therefore, a status in coal distribution which has not yet been fully utilised, and which, even if it had been utilised, could only have carried the reform of coal distribution a limited distance. If, therefore, reform is necessary—and this pamphlet is designed to show that it is—then further legislation is also necessary.

The kind of legislation required naturally depends upon the objects in view. Central ownership and control of an industry, with local devolution left to the discretion of the central body (which was the pattern for the reform of the coal industry itself) would certainly not be appropriate to coal distribution. The gas industry pattern, with ownership in the hands of an Area Board, comes nearer to meeting the case, but even this implies a degree of unified ownership and control that would be hard to reconcile with the circumstances of the coal trade.

What Form of Organisation?

The primary characteristic of the trade is the very large number of units—over 20,000—engaged in it, the numerical predominance of medium and small firms, and its wide geographical spread. Retail coal distribution is carried on from Land's End to John o'Groats, and the firms engaged in it range in size from country ironmongers selling small bags of patent fuel, and village carriers doing a bit of coal merchanting on the side, to such giants of the distributive trade as Charringtons.

A further characteristic of the trade is that there are several quite different types of organisation concerned in it. These include the Co-operative Societies, the National Coal Board, the Area Gas Boards (for coke), the traders in sea-borne coal, the multiple stores (such as Harrods in London)) the factors, the ordinary merchants with their enormous variations in turnover, and the 'dealers,' who often 'hump' the coal themselves and drive their own cart or lorry.

To blend all these heterogeneous traders into a single organisation, even a local one, would be a formidable task. The economics of the small country firm, which not only does general haulage but, as likely as not, also trades in potatoes, fruit and building materials, would be hopelessly upset. The identification of the assets of the small men which should be taken over, and the assessment of the compensation both for those assets (which may be few and rickety), and for the goodwill (which may be great, but almost impossible to value), bristle with such difficulties that one is inevitably led to a more selective approach to the problem. It does not follow, for example, that to get the reforms required **all** registered coal merchants will have to be brought within a new organisation. But enough of them must be brought in to make sure that the technical reforms will not be nullified by the exclusion of too many units.

Efficiency the Object

Again, it would be wrong to set about reforming coal distribution unless the change was approached primarily as a means of tackling the current inefficiencies. Indeed, no scheme for reform will stand up to criticism unless it is mainly directed to removing inefficiencies in a practical way or, at least, to creating conditions conducive to their removal which will not cause serious dislocation to the thousands of units engaged in the trade.

In this pamphlet we first describe the sources of inefficiency in the distribution, from a technical standpoint, indicating in each case what are

the defects in the existing methods which need to be removed. Then we analyse the characteristics of the distributive units engaged in the trade, indicating the extent to which continuation in their present form impedes the removal of the sources of inefficiency and stands in the way of better organisation; and propose the general manner in which they should be dealt with in a reorganised trade. Next we suggest ways in which technical inefficiencies could be removed. This leads to our proposal for a new organisation and structure for the coal trade involving radical changes. In the final section, we give a broad indication of what might be done to raise the efficiency of the trade, without embarking upon legislation, if it is not practicable to do so.

2. CAUSES OF INEFFICIENCY

LET us consider the process of coal distribution, starting at the point from which distribution by road becomes necessary, so that we may see what are the basic causes of inefficiency, to what extent they can be removed, and the lines along which distribution can best be reformed. For this purpose we will take the typical case of coal arriving at the railway coal yard of a big town, and leave on one side (to be dealt with later) such local features as distribution of coal direct from the collieries, or from sea-borne traders', wharves, or of coke from the gasworks.

DEPOT OPERATIONS

In a typical case, coal wagons arrive at the railway stations of big towns in a goods train made up of wagons containing coal, potatoes, steel, cattle, scrap iron, small parcels, furniture, etc.—what railwaymen call 'rough traffic'—or sometimes in complete train-loads carrying some 500 tons of coal. On arrival at the yard or depot the wagons are sorted out and dispatched down the numerous special sidings to the individual merchants who have rented the sidings from the railways. The unloading is nearly always done by primitive hand methods. The coal is loaded into hundredweight bags by two men, standing in the wagon (as soon as space has been cleared) one of whom fills the bag with a shovel while the other holds it open, and when it is full puts it on the scales and weighs it. The bags are then either put on the ground to await the lorry, or they are carried or wheeled on a trolley to the lorry which is backed up to the wagon.

When the coal is not being distributed immediately, it is taken to the merchant's stocking ground before bagging. The stocking ground consists normally of open bins, constructed of old railway sleepers with separate compartments for different qualities—house coal of various grades, anthracite, coke, small coal, etc.—with a consolidated coal-dust floor. When the coal is deposited, and later loaded into bags, it is moved twice

—and by hand at that—so that the cost is high. Moreover, the stocked coal tends to break up under the influence of the weather, and to absorb additional moisture. Small coal, or dust, is not popular with the domestic consumer, and in the old days, when there was some competition and supplies were plentiful, the merchant found it necessary to sell small stuff at a lower price.

These, then, are the main operations at the depot, and there has been little change in them for at least fifty years.

Resistance to Change

It is perhaps unnecessary to add that the depots are usually dirty and untidy and provide no decent washing facilities for the employees. The normal justification of competition—that it stimulates improved methods—hardly comes into the picture. It is a basic fact that the established pattern of operations at a depot itself impedes the improvement in methods which might be expected to result from competition. One has only to look at a big coal yard to see how difficult it would be, for example, to fit a mechanical handling plant into the maze of sidings, stocking grounds, sheds, and access roads for the multitude of merchants. These conditions inhibit change, but since all are subject to the same stifling conditions the great majority of merchants are satisfied with them: everyone at the depot is kept down to the same general level of inefficiency, for no one can introduce disturbing and costly innovations.

Apart, however, from the difficulty of cutting through the physical and legal tangle of the coal yards, the vast majority of merchants have not the turnover to justify installing mechanical handling and discharging appliances, with storage bunkers. If they are to be installed at all, they would have to be on a co-operative basis by several firms pooling their operations. A scheme for erecting a mechanical handling plant was worked out by the L.M.S. railway many years ago for the big depot at West Kensington, but no progress was made, due mainly to obstruction from the merchants. They must have felt that if once their coal was handled mechanically and simultaneously with similar coal bought by their competitors, the individual merchant would lose control of his coal and the individuality of his trade: the case for his continued separate existence would then have largely disappeared. So long as the merchants remain bound to the present pattern of depot operation they are in a position to prevent their competitors from installing new techniques which would force them all out of the familiar ruts.

Vested Interests and Established Rights

The attempted reform of the Kensington Coal Depot was motivated by the need to improve the turn-round of wagons. During the war the privately-owned coal wagons were pooled (leading subsequently to their public ownership) and the difficulty of getting more work out of old and depleted stock provided the chief incentive to the railways to promote this scheme. That the wagons had already been pooled seemed likely to reduce

the opposition. The scheme would also have presented the opportunity of concentrating coal handling at this depot and closing down other smaller depots nearby, with all the saving that this would have brought. But the attempt was defeated by a united front of the merchants, and even nationalisation of the railways has not revived it. No doubt the certainty of resistance by the merchants, and the maze of customary and legal rights through which any reform would have to thread its way, have made the whole project too controversial. The railway authorities may have concluded that the resources required could well be more usefully directed to other overdue reforms which carried a better assurance of success.

While all voluntary schemes of this nature would undoubtedly encounter insuperable opposition, there are a few local examples of the application of improved techniques on the part of individual merchants. The most notable is one by Messrs. Charrington (Coote and Warren) at Norwich, where the firm have a good turnover, and a yard to themselves. There the coal is unloaded by crane and grab, fed into a series of bunkers, with chutes leading to mechanical bagging and weighing appliances. Elsewhere, for example, at Cambridge and Chelmsford, the same firm have utilised cranes and grabs. A few other firms have used these appliances for loading coal direct from wagon into lorry for delivery loose.

Voluntary Reform Limited

These few schemes illustrate that minor changes in coal handling at the depots could be effected, if there were any real enterprise in the trade, but that any major alteration requires special circumstances (e.g. single operation of a depot, as at Norwich) which cannot be voluntarily secured at big coal yards. Mechanical coal handling plant could nevertheless be erected if the existing nexus of vested interests and traditional methods could be cut through. If this were done considerable savings in costs could be effected both to the railways and to the coal merchants, and improvements in the efficiency with which solid fuel is handled.

It will be fairly clear from the above that the main sources of inefficiency at the railway depots are:

- (i) The sorting of the wagons for each individual merchant;
- (ii) The discharging of the wagons and the manual loading of the coal into sacks;
- (iii) The lack of capital to pay for, and the lack of enterprise to install, mechanical appliances;
- (iv) The delays to the lorries while the sacks are being filled;
- (v) The double manual handling necessary where coal is stocked at the yard.

The remedies would have to include:

- (a) **A break-up of the existing pattern of the rights and interests of the merchants at the railway depot;**
- (b) **A concentration of depot operations so that use could be made of mechanical appliances for discharging wagons quickly**

filling and weighing the sacks, and stocking the coal on the ground;

- (c) **The availability of sufficient capital;**
- (d) **The creation of an appropriate organisation, adequately financed to instal and operate the mechanical appliances as a common service for those using the depot.**

FROM DEPOT TO CONSUMER

The spectacle of half a dozen different coal merchants' lorries serving the same street, is a feature of the trade which particularly impresses the general public as inefficient. People have become familiar with the same milkman delivering all along one street, with the postman going methodically from door to door, and with the garbage collection organised on the same system. They ask each other, 'Why, if garbage is most economically collected by one organisation, cannot coal be delivered more cheaply in the same way by a single merchant taking a block of streets?' There are differences of course, but the question demands an answer.

The answer is quite simple. Coal distribution is organised on a competitive basis, and not as a public service. Each merchant must, therefore, be free to get his customers where he can and to keep them if he can. Before nationalisation a merchant often possessed an established connection with a particular colliery and to some extent built up his trade on the coal of that colliery. To-day, all this is changed. Coal is no longer sold as Derby Brights, High Hazel Cobbles or Ryder Spires. The National Coal Board has reduced the innumerable varieties of house coal to a few grades at prices genuinely reflecting quality variations. So the distribution of coal, as of milk, is becoming more like that of any standardised product, calling for no special skill in salesmanship, and providing only the minimum opportunity for a special service. Thus what the man in the street criticises is not the multiplication of merchants, but the whole system of distribution—the competitive versus the planned distribution of a largely standardised bulk commodity.

Scope for Economies

But to this wider criticism there is a partial answer. If, it is argued, the lorry leaves the depot with a full load, normally two or three tons, it is not so much the time taken to travel from a house in one street to a house in another that causes waste, as the number of bags dropped at each house, and thus the number of houses visited to dispose of the load. But this answer is only partial because it admits that time and money must be consumed in moving the lorry from one house to another; and, to the extent that each lorry load will take longer to deliver, the turnover will be reduced, and its overhead costs consequently increased. It is a matter of degree.

That economies could be obtained by reducing the number of merchants engaged in delivery, is not open to doubt, and for many years the Coal Merchants' Federation pressed for restrictions, such as the licensing of merchants, designed to reduce the number of entrants into the trade, and

thereby to concentrate delivery areas and increase the turnover of those that remained. But restrictions of this kind are neither sufficient nor justifiable. On the whole, the effect of competition from the 'dealers'—against whom the licensing system was intended to operate—was to keep down prices, and to prevent the informal fixing of prices through local branches of the Coal Merchants' Federation.

The normal process of delivery is straightforward, and consists simply of transporting the coal from depot to destination, and 'humping' the bags from lorry to coal hole. There is a little, but not much, scope for mechanising and reducing the cost of this heavy and dirty process. More use might be made of trolleys for moving the coal, not to save time but to save the physical energy of the 'coalie', and enable him to deliver more coal per day without exhausting himself. The quantity 'carried off' per day tends to become standardised and fluctuates round five tons. To overcome this restrictiveness—for so it is in the case of the stronger 'coalies'—well-designed bonus schemes should be more widely adopted. No doubt other methods of raising efficiency would also be evolved by an adequate planning staff.

In the actual delivery of coal, therefore, the main inefficiencies are:

- (i) Excessive distances covered, and time occupied, because customers are scattered and many merchants operate from the same depot.
- (ii) Smallness of the tonnage distributed per lorry and per man resulting from (i), with the higher costs that follow;
- (iii) The small quantity 'carried off' per day by the coalman, because of the heaviness of the work, or the general absence of bonus schemes.

The remedies would seem to be:

- (a) **Measures to concentrate the area within which each lorry load is delivered;**
- (b) **Bonus schemes for carrying off more than a certain minimum tonnage per day.**
- (c) **Experimentation in minor improvements, such as discounts for loose deliveries, and for taking single large deliveries in place of multiple small deliveries of bagged coal; and maximum economic incentives by lower summer prices to level out peak deliveries during the winter.**

RUNNING THE BUSINESS

During the last thirty years perhaps the most significant change in coal distribution has been the increase, both absolute and relative, in the costs per ton of running the managerial side of the coal merchant's business. This may be attributed to higher profits, bigger directors' emoluments, the spreading of the same tonnage over a larger number of firms, or a reduced tonnage over the same number of firms. Probably the first two and last of these explanations provide the clues.

The overhead costs, per unit, of running a business depend essentially on the turnover, and since the overhead cost per ton of distributing coal

is now high there is a presumption that it is due in part to a smaller turnover than could be efficiently handled by the office. This presumption is strengthened by the following facts:

(i) A line of different coal order offices can often be seen adjoining each other near the railway depots, or in shopping centres. One office, rather larger than one of the present individual offices, could certainly handle the whole of the coal-ordering trade of the district.

(ii) The Co-ops, who generally accept orders at their stores, operate with much lower overhead costs though they take care to apportion the cost of the services provided equitably among the various goods sold.

(iii) The coal trade is seasonal, and staffs which may be fully engaged during cold spells may have little to do in the summer.

Whatever the explanation, however, the office overheads of the coal merchants probably represent 40 per cent. of their total distribution costs, and it is certain that such a figure could be substantially reduced with better organisation. Generalisations, however, are dangerous, and there is some reason to believe that the larger merchants manage to keep their office costs down to a more reasonable proportion of the total.

Providing a 'Service'

A very few of these large distributors—who deal not only in bagged coal delivered to the householder but also in 'loose' coal (or coke) supplied in large quantities to small industries, hotels, institutions, and commercial establishments—provide also a 'service.' This service, at its best, includes not only showrooms where the latest stoves, domestic boilers, improved open fires and so on can be viewed, but also a trained staff of experts who advise clients on heating problems and on the appropriate variety of fuel for a particular appliance. The provision of such a service is, however, exceptional, and shows little sign of becoming general. Normally, 'service' consists of being able to supply a fair range of different fuels at short notice, and of employing courteous, honest and helpful 'coalies.'

The provision of showrooms for solid fuel appliances is costly and, with the employment of competent technical staff, is unlikely to pay for itself unless the business turnover is large. Yet it is of great importance to the country's well-being that we should burn coal less wastefully, and discharge less soot and sulphur dioxide into the air. The cost of smoke pollution attributed to domestic use has been estimated by the Beaver Committee to be anything up to £150 millions a year (which is equivalent to £5 a ton of domestic coal consumed) as a result of loss of heat up the chimney, damage to buildings, increased laundry bills, etc., apart from the injuries to health and the higher death rate attributable to atmospheric pollution.

If the generally high managerial costs were due to the provision of so useful a service as the sale of efficient appliances and advice upon

their installation, maintenance and fuel supply, the money would be well spent. But this is not so. The high costs seem to be the result of the inefficiency and duplication.

The Small Man

The ability of the large firms to keep down their overhead costs by means of heavy turnover is paralleled, for entirely different reasons, by the very small operator. The dealers and hawkers often operate their businesses from their own homes. The wife keeps the accounts and takes orders, while the husband does the rounds receiving, in effect, most of his remuneration in wages rather than in profits or directors' emoluments. In their small way, these dealers are efficient units, in that their costs of distribution are low (as is also their standard of living). Since coal distribution, as generally practised, is no longer a skilled trade, but simply the moving of a standardised commodity from the railway depot to the domestic coal hole, this primitive and individualist method of distribution can be broadly justified by its ability to survive.

The main sources of inefficiency on the managerial and office side of the coal merchants' businesses are, therefore:

- (i) The excessive number of order offices, clerks, office managers and directors in relation to the tonnage distributed;
- (ii) The unattractive character of these offices, the almost universal lack of any effort to sell efficient solid fuel appliances, and the absence of service to the consumer, particularly on the technical side.

The remedies would have to include:

- (a) **A concentration of order offices and staffs and thereby an increase in the turnover of each office;**
- (b) **The provision of showrooms for solid fuel appliances together with a staff of fuel technologists to advise on the choice and installation of appropriate appliances.**

3. HOW TRADE IS SHARED

THE business of distributing coal is shared by a number of different sections in the trade. Each of these must be examined in the light of proposals for reorganisation.

The Co-operative Societies have obtained a very large stake in the business and have generally shown themselves capable of distributing coal more economically than their competitors, mainly because their administrative costs are low because of their possession of premises and common services at their branch establishments. Politically and socially too, the

Labour Party regard the Co-operative Movement as highly valuable, and only if there were no means of fitting their coal distributing activities into an efficient regional and national pattern would it be justifiable even to consider their expropriation.

The National Coal Board

The National Coal Board carries on a considerable trade in coal distribution of two main types. Firstly, and more important, is the local distribution from the 'landsale wharves' of many collieries, sometimes confined to miners' coal, but frequently covering other households, as well as industrial coal which is distributed by road in large quantities. Distribution in this way is economical and efficient, though the facilities, especially for mechanically bagging domestic coal, are often rudimentary, and better and quicker methods could be adopted. Secondly, the Board is engaged in more 'orthodox' retail distribution, through separate merchanting companies which were either acquired by them at the time of nationalisation, or were previously owned and collectively operated by the collieries and which carry on their trade through a string of order offices, obtaining their supplies from the collieries themselves. Here, too, the general standard of efficiency (as measured by costs and profits) seems to be satisfactory, and further improvements are expected in the future.

There seems no reason to doubt that the Coal Board will be ready to co-operate in any schemes for reforming distribution which take reasonable account of their interests, plans and potentialities. There is no case, therefore, for interfering with the ownership of their retail depots, or the activities of their colliery 'landsale' wharves. On the contrary, they should be encouraged to develop and extend their retail trade, buy up private firms prepared to sell out at a reasonable price, and establish new depots and order offices where these can be economically operated. But they should do so on a planned basis spreading outwards from existing centres, rather than starting in entirely new districts. Competition should continue to exist between the Coal Board's sales depots, Co-ops, and the other units remaining in the trade; but it would be recognised that the objective is honest competition as a stimulus to improving the service, and to devising new methods of reducing costs of distribution, rather than simply the maximizing of profits. In this way the number of firms engaged in the trade would inevitably be reduced.

Area Gas Boards

The twelve Area Gas Boards dispose of about 13 million tons of coke and breeze annually, of which the greater part is sold through distributors. The distributors concerned are mainly the larger merchants who, we suggest, should be transferred to public ownership. The remaining tonnage is sold direct by the Gas Boards, several of which possess efficient mechanical loading arrangements and well-equipped stocking grounds to deal with the seasonal character of the coke trade.

Under the proposed new organisation the bulk of the coke trade would be handled by publicly owned undertakings, either the Area Boards themselves, or the larger merchants transferred to public ownership. The mechanical handling plant should be integral with the gas works plant, just as the colliery landsales plant form part of the surface works of the colliery. In each case new capital expenditure on improving the efficiency of the plant should be covered by the nationalised industry concerned. There is accordingly no purpose in disturbing this trade. And it will not be necessary to apply to the central coal distribution body, proposed later in this pamphlet, for additional capital for the purpose. Plans should, however, be submitted to and discussed with the regional body proposed, on which the Area Gas Board would be represented.

Large Merchants

There is no clearly defined class of merchants who can be described as 'large,' but it would probably be reasonable to describe in this way any firm doing a trade of, say, 25,000 or more tons a year. This class, apart from the sea-borne traders, certain Co-ops, and the Coal Board itself, includes such giants as Charringtons and Rickett Cockerell among the 'pure' coal merchants, Hall and Co. among the merchants who combine coal distribution with haulage contracting and trading in building materials; as well as such firms as Associated Coal Wharves and Samuel Williams, which, with their associated companies, not only engage in extensive coastwise trade, but also have big interests in the handling of other bulk materials (including oil) and in retail coal distribution.

The large merchants play a vital part in retail distribution, and, within the limitations imposed upon them by circumstances, some of them are reasonably efficient. Charrington's, for instance, have set up a showroom for solid fuel appliances and technical advisory and contracting service for heating installations. Possibly a few other 'large' merchants have followed their example. However efficient some of these large firms may strive to be, they are always handicapped by the technical factors described in Section 2, which, for the reasons given, seem incapable of being changed within the present system. Since efficiency requires a virtual monopoly, it follows that the trade should be turned over to public ownership to the extent necessary to secure the desired reforms.

A number of special problems would arise under public ownership among those firms which do not deal wholly, or almost wholly, in solid fuels. Thus the question would arise as to whether, along with their coal distribution activities, it would be desirable to transfer to public ownership their trade in building materials, the ownership of colliers, the distribution of oil fuel and so on. It would be wrong to be dogmatic on the point, but the following considerations would seem relevant to the treatment of businesses brought under public ownership.

1. Where a business in coal distribution is closely mixed up with the distribution of other bulk materials, for example, building materials, the peak demands for which are complementary, it would be

- economically disadvantageous to bring one side of the business into public ownership and to leave the other privately owned. Where, however as in the case of say, a department store (or, for that matter, the Co-ops) the other activities are the retail selling of miscellaneous goods, there would be no significant advantage in public ownership.
2. Where ships are owned and mainly used for the movement of coal, which is subsequently distributed by the same or an associated company, it would be economically disadvantageous to separate the shipping and land transport activities, unless there was a serious lack of balance between these activities which could not be corrected.
 3. Where a solid fuel distributor also trades in liquid fuels competing with solid fuels, it may be best to separate the two sides of the business. The fact that different vehicles are used for distributing these fuels, and that the primary function of distributing solid fuel as economically as possible should not be lost sight of, may make it undesirable to attempt to combine these two trades.
 4. Where an undertaking, whether publicly or privately owned, possesses lorries for coal distribution, no limitation should be imposed on their use for other trading activities, since this would have injurious economic effects on operation costs.
 5. There is no political or economic reason why publicly owned enterprises, engaged in the distribution of solid fuel, should not also compete with other trades or industries where they possess the facilities to do so. But care should be taken to ensure, wherever practicable, that separate cost figures were kept.
 6. The trade of builders' merchants has been criticised for its restrictive activities. A publicly owned coal distributing enterprise, operating in the same field, might be a valuable weapon against monopolistic and restrictive practices.

Sea-Borne Coal

From Aberdeen to Penzance there is a succession of varying sized ports to which coal is shipped by coastal vessels from the coalfield shipment ports. At the discharging ports there are distributing companies, some of which own the colliers used in this trade, and the wharves and plant where the ships are discharged. The scale of the plant ranges from small cranes with grabs to full-scale coal discharging and handling plant complete with screens, conveyors, storage grounds and even briquetting works.

This coastwise trade is large, and except perhaps at the smaller ports, the coal is discharged and handled from ship fairly efficiently. The turnover, however, is usually insufficient to keep the plant fully employed, and this is important if costs are to be kept to a minimum. Generally, therefore, there is no sufficient economic justification for more than one discharging wharf at most ports, and since a limitation to one, as a condi-

tion of efficient and economical operation, would mean a monopoly, there is a good case for transferring these assets into public ownership. Moreover, it may be desirable to concentrate operations of two or more different ports, or to co-ordinate sea- and rail-borne operations. It might, for example, be cheaper to handle the entire requirements for a district through a mechanical railway depot rather than part through an old-fashioned depot and part through a poorly equipped wharf handling sea-borne coal. Or, the reverse position might obtain pointing to the transference of all the coal to sea transport

Though the firms operating at wharves are usually fairly efficient, no general rationalisation of the coal trade could ignore them. The best arrangement would be to transfer them to public ownership. This would facilitate rationalisation on the lines suggested in the preceding paragraph, and it would avoid accusations of unfairness which might be made if the sea-borne coal trade were left to private enterprise while large and competing rail-borne trades were transferred to public ownership.

Small and Medium Merchants

A small merchant may be broadly defined as a man owning one lorry, occasionally hiring another, employing a driver, a loader and running a small office, with the help of which he may distribute a maximum of 2,500 tons of domestic coal annually, but who, in practice distributes rather less but does various other haulage jobs on the side. The overhead costs per ton of coal are bound to be heavy, and it seems doubtful whether such a business is big enough to maintain an office. Yet there are undoubtedly thousands of merchants operating on that scale with practically no capital equipment. They only avoid bankruptcy because, under Government controls each householder has to register with a merchant and it is sufficiently difficult to change merchants to assure him a considerable measure of stability though not of prosperity.

Total distribution costs vary greatly, but seem generally to lie between 25/- and 35/- a ton. Taking 40 per cent. of the lower figure—which is believed to be the normal proportion of managerial to total costs—such a merchant will have a maximum of £1,250 annually with which to pay his office expenses and remunerate himself. This means pretty thin subsistence for the owner.

We may tentatively define 'small and medium merchants' as having an annual trade of between 2,500 tons and 25,000 tons. It is a fair guess that at the bottom end of this range a merchant will be either on his way up, as a result of specially hard work and economical operations or, if he depends entirely on coal distribution for his living, on his way out to bankruptcy. At the top end of the range the firm may be operating efficiently and on an adequate scale to satisfy the financial expectations of the owners and management. In between there will be many degrees of efficiency and inefficiency, but the general position of these firms is likely to be difficult and their future precarious.

These small and medium firms probably cover some 75 per cent. of the number of merchants, but perhaps no more than 25 per cent. of the total domestic coal trade. It is suggested later than no attempt should be made to transfer these businesses compulsorily to public ownership and that if they can continue to exist, in fair competition with the publicly owned sector, they should be allowed to do so. Alternatively their businesses might be acquired on a voluntary and piecemeal basis by the publicly owned corporations or by the Co-ops.

The 'Dealers'

The so-called 'dealers' are the 'barrow boys' of the coal trade. They generally operate on a family basis, and their profits are a useful addition to the wages they can afford to pay themselves. A 'dealer' will own a cart or lorry which he will operate himself, often with the help of a son, or at the most with one employee. His office will be his home; his depot will be the railway wagon of a larger merchant or factor who supplies him with coal; and his customers, before the days of registration, were those who stopped him and bought one or two bags as he passed along the street.

Such a trader carries no overheads worth mentioning and could undersell his competitors so long as he continued to operate in this small hand-to-mouth way, and did not employ other workers and organise an office. He is often accused by the regular merchants of dishonesty, and, no doubt, in some cases, with reason. For if a dealer is dishonest all the fruits of his dishonesty enter his own pocket, and there is no question of squaring his workers, or sharing the ill-gotten gains. He runs, however, a risk of special attention by the Weights and Measures Inspectors. Because he deals in very small quantities, he has less chance of success in palming off two bags of coal and getting paid for three than the employees of larger merchants often delivering ten or more bags. His defalcations are therefore more likely to be the giving of short weight, which is the special province of the Inspectors, or the misrepresentation of the quality of his coal.

Checking Dishonesty

It might be possible to check any tendency on the part of the dealers to give short weight by a system of sealing the mechanically weighed bags at the depot. By such a system the Weights and Measures Inspectors might be dispensed with, so far as solid fuel is concerned, and the obligation of carrying a scale on every vehicle engaged in retail distribution could be ended.

With the introduction of public ownership it is important that maximum individual liberty be combined with the saving of manpower even if there is some risk that dishonest practices may be a little easier.

Naturally the dealer, whose low costs enable him to undersell his larger competitors, is not only disliked by them, but is criticised for not

providing a service and for not distributing coal during the summer. They advocate, therefore, the imposition of such conditions upon his right to trade, as he will be unable to satisfy except by fundamentally altering his methods and drastically increasing his costs. All merchants should, the coal merchants' trade association used to suggest, be licensed, and failure to comply with the conditions of the licence should result in exclusion from the trade.

In fact the dealer is only a minor menace to the established trade, for, as soon as he starts to expand, his managerial and office costs soar and he suffers the disabilities of the ordinary merchant—including the too small turnover to pay for his office. The dealer, therefore, is never likely to absorb any important share of the distributive trade. But under the organisation suggested later, the number of dealers may well increase, for they should be able to buy their coal more cheaply and, therefore, undercut their larger competitors more easily. Their existence is justified by low costs, and they could, if they were articulate, claim their lowly place in retail coal distribution under any organisation.

The Wholesale Trade

The activities of the wholesale 'factors' do not generally involve any physical handling of the coal, but simply the purchase from the Coal Board with instructions to the latter to consign it to the buyer. Factors assume the financial risks and take a certain responsibility for the arrival of the coal at the right time and place. In some cases they also arrange for further haulage, from the railway depot to the ultimate destination.

Most of the large distributing firms undertake some of this trade. Margins charged to large consumers are generally small, commonly below 1/- a ton, unless special services are required. To merchants handling domestic coal a typical charge would be 2/- a ton. There is already a good deal of competition, and it may become more intense if the large merchants are transferred to public ownership and direct supply to consumers and merchants by the National Coal Board is expanded.

The purely factoring trade is no problem, involving nothing more than paper transactions. Where it is providing a useful service it will, no doubt, continue, but as competition increases the trade will become less profitable.

4. REFORMS REQUIRED

WE come now to the constructive task of proposing a method by which the main sources of inefficiency in coal distribution, as described in Section 2, may be removed or mitigated. The technical requirements of reform must be fitted into an appropriate organisation.

The needs at the railway depot are clear. Discharge of coal from railway wagons, weighing, sacking, and loading on to lorries, must be mechanised and concentrated, and the present waste of valuable acres of coal yards terminated.

What will be required at the newly equipped rail depots will vary according to size, but the larger ones should be provided with mechanical installations. These include wagon tippers, storage bunkers, loading chutes, mechanical bag filling, weighing and sealing appliances, cranes, portable conveyors and perhaps dumper wagons for the stocking grounds. Also required are washing and canteen facilities for the workers. Further improvements in handling methods will certainly be developed and new appliances brought into use in the future.

All the coal (other than special qualities or consignments for which the facilities might not be appropriate) would pass through the plant, and the whole nexus of siding rents, private sidings and individual stocking grounds would disappear. Anyone, whether merchant or consumer, should be free to use the plant and to bring his lorry to the loading chute, appropriate for the quality of coal required, and to pay for the coal and the freight, and loading charges. Possibly some preference should be given to the regular traders, or an off-peak period set aside for those obtaining coal for their own use. Charges, too could be differentiated to reduce peak periods at the plant and to improve its 'load factor'.

The installation should be worked as a consumer service on a co-operative basis, by a management committee which might perhaps be elected by the users of the plant, on the basis of the tonnage handled through the depot in the previous year. Profits in excess of say 10 per cent. on the capital employed could be distributed annually pro-rata to the tonnage passing through the plant. The plant might be called the Cooperative Coal Depot (CCD).

Raising the Capital

The depots and wharves in the various Regions will require a good deal of capital expenditure to make them into efficient, and economical mechanised units, and the problem is from where this capital should come. There are two main alternatives:

- (i) It could be subscribed by the undertakings using the plant.
- (ii) It could be subscribed by the national co-ordinating body suggested later.

There are both advantages and disadvantages in these alternatives. Under (i) there would be greater local interest and responsibility than if only the management of the installation was entrusted to local initiative. On the other hand, it might be difficult to raise the money for a co-operative venture of this kind; and, if it were raised, it might not be well spent. A review of the requirements over a wider regional area is needed. The construction of special plant, in the designing of which the national body will have acquired experience, will also be desirable. These arguments in favour of a regional plan are perhaps decisive.

A regional plan, however, does not mean that a Regional body should necessarily subscribe the capital, or take responsibility for the management of the CCD. It means only that the regional requirements should be

assessed by the regional body and a selection be made by it of the most useful projects. The finance itself should be the responsibility of the national organisation, which would also have to assess the priority of the large number of schemes put forward by the regions. It is perhaps unlikely, except at a time of depression and a widespread adoption of public works programmes, that large capital sums could immediately be found for installations of this kind. They would have to take their turn, and each project would be rigorously examined on its technical advantage and the estimated return on the contemplated capital expenditure. The national organisation would be responsible for this, for initiating a programme of construction with the Minister of Fuel and Power, and for seeing that authorised capital expenditure was not exceeded.

Nevertheless there should be decentralisation. Each region might be authorised to put in hand capital projects for improving distribution so long as they did not exceed a figure fixed in advance with the Minister of Fuel and Power.

While, therefore, the CCDs should be managed by local people, the capital installation should have been erected by a 'Regional Coal Distribution Council' (RCDC), and be owned and financed centrally by a 'National Coal Distribution Council' (NCDC). The precise arrangements for turning over the installation to the local management committee might raise some difficult problems, but these could be dealt with by individual contractual arrangements between the NCDC and the local committees.

Concentrating Retail Firms

The main purpose to be served in the reform of the actual distribution of the coal from the depot to the consumer is the concentration of the trade. There are, however, no inherent reasons why the reforms proposed at the depots should automatically lead to a concentration of actual delivery operations. To secure immediate economies in distribution a measure of compulsory concentration of operations by reducing the number of merchants is necessary. Complete rationalisation of distribution can never be achieved without radical reforms designed to effect a limited concentration, and to create conditions for the more extensive concentration necessary to reduce the cost of distribution. Both these purposes are in mind in the following proposals.

Compulsory concentration should be secured by combining the large merchants. Unless these are brought into public ownership endless difficulties and frictions are bound to occur between them and the Co-operative Coal Depots, and distributive economies would be largely frustrated.

The definition of what constitutes a large merchant should be considered simultaneously with the preparation of the legislation, and on the basis of fuller information on the structure of the trade than is available to outside students. We tentatively suggest, however, bringing into public ownership all merchants with a trade of 25,000 tons and upwards a year.

It could be argued that a more logical approach would be to concentrate the small merchants, but for reasons explained in Section 1 that

would be extremely difficult. Moreover it would be more likely to cause greater dislocation during the transition than would the buying out of the larger undertakings. Finally, to take over the smaller merchants would not remove the danger of friction between the large merchants and the Co-operative Depots. Thus it is better to sacrifice the more logical to the more practical approach and to start with the large merchants, concentrating big *tonnages* into an efficient distributive organisation rather than large *numbers of distributors*. A further advantage is that it is only among the large merchants that the managerial capacity is likely to be found which will be competent to run the still larger units.

Competitive Public Ownership

Accordingly, large merchants should be brought into public ownership, and reorganised into regional units efficiently to carry on retail coal distribution. In each region these publicly-owned trading units should form a publicly owned enterprise, which might be called the London, Southern, North Western, etc. Coal Corporation. This would be responsible for managing all the local assets of the large merchants formerly operating in each Region.

There will remain in the trade as separate and independent trading units, the Co-operative Societies (whose branches will have to work out some way of concentrating and co-ordinating their activities), the smaller merchants, the Area Gas Boards engaged in coke distribution, and the dealers. In most Regions the National Coal Board will also be engaged in retail distribution. There is no decisive reason why competition should not continue between these various units, but common services and mutual help should be developed (through the Regional Coal Distribution Councils) to serve all sections of the trade.

The above proposals apply only to merchants operating from railway depots. In the case of those who own wharves or discharging equipment at sea, river or canal ports, the *size* of the businesses to be transferred into public ownership is not so important.

Generally speaking those who handle water-borne coal should be brought under the same management as those dealing with rail-borne coal. But where, as in the case of the Thames, very large quantities of mainly industrial coal are handled by sea-borne traders, there may be a temporary case for establishing separate publicly owned units to take over the present companies. Later, however, sea-borne and rail-borne activities should be brought together under single ownership, so that a deliberate economic choice may be made on the means of transport to be employed for particular purposes.

A Better Service

The main sources of inefficiency on the managerial and office side of coal distribution mentioned in Section 2 were found to be the small turnover in relation to the clerical and managerial staff employed, the excessive number of order offices, and the lack of any service to the consumer

such as the display and sale of efficient solid fuel appliances, and the provision of technical advice.

The transfer of the larger businesses to public enterprise, and the already low administrative costs of the Co-ops, should ensure a greater concentration of business and bigger turnovers for most of the trade. It will have been clear from the description of the businesses of the medium and small merchants in Section 3, that their units are too small to provide adequate consumer service. Only a few of the biggest distributors have ventured into this field. But a technical service is essential to greater fuel efficiency and abatement of the smoke nuisance. This cannot be left to builders' merchants and similar establishments, which usually sell the products of a particular manufacturer, and have no interest in the efficient use of fuel, still less in checking smoke pollution.

Since a service of this kind is expensive and unsuitable for competition it should be on a co-operative basis, forming a common service contributed to by all local distributors. While it should be self-supporting on the basis of sales of appliances, installation contracts, and fees for advice, it will, of course need working capital. This might be provided by the various distributing enterprises of the locality, or by the Regional Coal Distribution Council. The management would be responsible to those who provided the capital.

5. A CO-ORDINATED PLAN

THE purpose for which the regional co-ordinating bodies for coal distribution—Regional Coal Distribution Councils—will be essential are:

1. Generally supervising coal distribution in the Region and ensuring that the trade is conducted in accordance with the public interest.
2. Reviewing the facilities available in the Region for discharging railway wagons, road vehicles, ships and barges, and for handling, storing and delivering solid fuel, and recommending to a National Coal Distribution Council all major projects for the improvement of these facilities.
3. Providing (subject to the approval of the NCDC) showrooms for the display and sale of approved domestic solid fuel appliances, and for the provision of technical advice; and establishing a contracting service for the installation of such appliances.
4. Collaborating with the National Industrial Fuel Efficiency Service, and with other organisations, public or private, concerned with securing the more efficient use of solid fuel.
5. Establishing any common services connected with solid fuel distribution that may appear worthwhile.

6. Encouraging the application of the latest ideas of scientific management to coal distribution.
7. Offering incentives to consumers designed to reduce seasonal fluctuations in employment, and to secure the most economic use of the plant, machinery and vehicles.
8. Promoting the welfare of workers employed in the trade and observing healthy working conditions.

Regional Organisations

With duties such as the foregoing, which should be prescribed in the legislation, it will be seen that the RCDC will be a very important element in the machinery of distribution. For certain purposes, especially the provision of finance for major items of capital expenditure, a central organisation is necessary. In this respect the position of the RCDC's would be very similar to that of the Area Gas Boards who obtain their capital requirements from the Gas Council. In other respects their powers would be smaller, for they would not own the assets of all the distributing undertakings in their Region.

The nucleus of an organisation already exists in the Regional Sales Offices of the National Coal Board. All orders for coal for each region are, in principle, channelled through these offices, and they are thus in a position to influence and, if it became Government policy, to enforce measures designed to secure the co-ordination and better organisation of distribution. Nevertheless, although the NCB is bound to work in the public interest, it is no reflection upon them to suggest that the consuming public and other interested parties should participate in these duties.

'Representative' Appointments

Accordingly the RCDC should include, in the first place, two representatives of the consuming public. To ensure its strength on the practical side of solid fuel distribution and servicing it should also include representatives from the different elements in the trade: representatives of the Coal Board, of the Area Gas Board concerned, of the Co-ops, of the large merchants—now publicly owned—operating in the region, of the British Transport Commission, and of the workers employed in the Region. Most of these appointments on the Regional Coal Distribution Council would be part-time.

We have used the word 'representatives' above, but it is not intended to suggest that the members of these Councils should actually be appointed by the various interests mentioned. They should be appointed by the Minister and be responsible to him, in the same way as the members of the gas and electricity Boards. In practice, however, the 'interests' concerned would no doubt suggest a short list of names from which the Minister could make his selection, and appoint the Chairman. As it is unlikely that there

would be a regional consumers' organisation the Minister might do well to appoint a professional man.

The RCDC should be financed by a small levy on the coal supplied in the Region. The coal levied might be confined to domestic solid fuel, or, if the activities of the RCDC affected industrial solid fuel also, a smaller levy might be imposed on that as well. It could be collected very simply through the NCB Regional Sales Office, while the local Gas Board would cover the coke sold in the Region. The amount of the levy, being in the nature of taxation, should be fixed by the Minister of Fuel and Power after consultation with the Treasury, and could vary from Region to Region. It should not be necessary for the levy to be more than perhaps threepence a ton.

The National Council

The central organisation which will be necessary—the National Coal Distribution Council—might, like the Gas Council, be drawn primarily from regional chairmen. Its duties would be the raising of capital finance, the approval of the technical projects recommended by the Regional Councils, the appointment of the Boards of the new publicly-owned enterprises, the organisation of research and development on methods of solid fuel distribution, and collaboration with existing bodies engaged on research into improved regional chairman. Its duties would be the raising of capital finance, the appliances and better domestic fuels. These duties could be carried out by a full-time Chairman, assisted by the Chairmen of the Regional Councils, part-time representatives of the National Coal Board, the Co-operative Wholesale Society, the Gas Council (for coke), the British Transport Commission, nominees of the trade unions concerned, and, it is suggested, the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Domestic Coal Consumers' Council set up under the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act.

The staff required would be quite small, the most important being the engineers and accountants who would have to examine and approve the capital projects submitted by the Regions. The members, other than the Chairman, could be part-time and would normally be remunerated from other sources. There will be no need therefore, to pay them more than the appropriate allowances for attending meetings, although provision might be made for the payment of fees to the unsalaried members. The financial resources of the Council could be raised by a levy on the Regional Councils. The National Council, will, of course, be responsible for the service of any loan capital, and must be put in a position in which this can be assured.

The NCDC would be subject to the same kind of control by the Minister of Fuel and Power as other nationalised industries. The Minister could give the Council 'general directions' on matters within their control; the Council should prepare development programmes, annual reports and accounts. The Minister's approval of financial policy (which may affect employment policy) and of the issue of stock, and so on, would also be necessary.

6. WHAT CAN BE DONE

THE organisation proposed in this pamphlet may appear somewhat complex. This is mainly because it has been described in the context of the problems with which it will have to deal, rather than submitted as a tidy paper scheme to be superimposed upon the coal distribution trade. However, in its simplest terms, it consists only of the following elements:

1. **A National Coal Distribution Council**, appointed by the Minister of Fuel and Power, comprising certain of the Chairmen of Regional Coal Distribution Councils, with representatives of the Coal Board, the Gas Council, the Transport Commission, the Domestic Coal Consumers Council, the trade unions concerned, and perhaps the Co-operative Wholesale Society.
2. **Regional Coal Distribution Councils**, appointed, by the Minister, comprising a similar representation to that of the National Council, but including also representatives of the Co-ops and the publicly-owned coal distributing companies, and substituting a consumer for a representative of the Consumers' Council.
3. **Publicly-owned companies formed by a regional amalgamation of the large merchants** whose businesses are taken over.
4. **Mechanised depots and wharves managed by the local interests**, through which all the normal trade of the locality would pass.

The possibility of creating a structure of this kind would depend to a large extent upon the political possibility of regarding the Co-ops as an already existing public service, with which, like the National Coal Board, it will be unnecessary seriously to interfere, and of treating them, for that reason, in a different way from the large privately owned distributing firms. A primary purpose of measures to bring trades and industries into public ownership is to secure the protection of the consumer. Since the Co-ops exist for the sole benefit of the consumer, it is entirely reasonable to permit them to retain their identity and pursue their social purposes under the proposed new dispensation. A difference in treatment will be meted out to the private merchants according to the size of their businesses, and it would be strange to accept as justified a differentiation based on quantity but not one based on the degree of protection that existed for the consumer.

Scope for Administrative Action

The structure of the trade proposed would require complicated and controversial legislation, for which it might be difficult to find time in Parliament. It is worth considering briefly, therefore, whether it would be possible to make some advance towards a useful reform of coal distribution without legislation.

The reform of methods of distribution generally has not been given as much thought by the Labour Party as it deserves. The need to raise industrial productivity is fully recognised but, if the resources engaged in distribution and the provision of services are not also applied more effec-

tively, the increase in the gross national product will fall considerably short of any increase achieved in industrial production alone. If, therefore, something effective can be achieved to improve coal distribution, without legislation, it will be well worth while to attempt it.

Several of the measures suggested above could be carried through by the nationalised fuel and transport industries under general directions given by the appropriate Minister. Thus the National Coal Board and the Area Gas Boards could be directed to extend their interests in the wholesale and retail trade by increasing their direct sales to consumers from collieries and gas works; and, in the case of the Coal Board, either by the acquisition of existing firms engaged in coal distribution or by establishing new branches which would serve as a nucleus to facilitate the ultimate introduction of the main body of reforms proposed.

Progress could also be made towards the mechanical discharging of railway wagons, gravity filling of coal sacks and loading of loose coal into lorries. The British Transport Commission could be directed to pursue a policy of equipping as many as possible of their coal depots with mechanical handling plant. This might be done jointly by the Transport Commission and the Coal Board, because the kind of mechanical plant which would suit the Commission would be designed to secure the quickest turn-round of the railway wagons, whereas the Coal Board would want to make sure that the coal finished up in the best possible condition, and had not been broken up by unnecessarily rough handling.

A further measure of reform, which might even be adopted by a Conservative Government, would be to try to give new impetus to the clean air campaign by persuading, or directing, the Coal Board and the Area Gas Boards to establish joint show-rooms at which would be demonstrated, and sold (including hire-purchase sales) appliances to burn smokeless fuel, or smoky fuel smokelessly. At these show-rooms there should also be provided a technical advisory service on fuel and appliance problems.

An Essential Reform

Finally, we must emphasise that the defect of the coal distributive trade is not, basically, that vast profits are being filched between the pithead and the final consumers which could better be devoted to raising the wages of the miners or the coalmen. If there is an excessive difference between the pithead and the retail price, as the miners have long claimed, the reasons for it are the defective organisation and out-of-date methods which are followed by the distributive trade. **Perhaps the most important of these defects lies in the physical lay-out of the coal yards at the railway depots, and in the tangle of rights and interests that the merchants have acquired at them. It would seem that the only way to remedy this state of affairs is for the Transport Commission to cut ruthlessly through this tangle and go all out, in collaboration with Coal Board, for mechanical handling at the coal yards.** There are, as has been shown above, many other defects in the trade, but this is the basic one from which many others derive. Sooner or later it will have to be tackled.

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